



Thursday 30 June 2016

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# Citizen science portal lets members of the public play Darwin



by Toon Lambrechts,

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## SUMMARY

*A group of young Flemish researchers has launched an appeal to boost citizen participation in scientific research projects*

### We, scientists

**A**lways wanted to follow in Darwin's footsteps? It's possible, thanks to a group of young Flemish researchers. Through an ongoing project at the University of Sheffield in the UK, you can analyse a series of birds' beaks in 3D, just as Darwin did in his time.



It's one of many citizen science projects on the [Everyone a Scientist portal](#), an initiative of the Jonge Academie. The organisation was founded in 2013 under the auspices of the Royal Flemish

Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts. It consists of young researchers from various Flemish universities (*pictured*).

One of Jonge Academie's first assignments was to promote science communication, says Violet Soen, a historian at the University of Leuven who specialises in religion during the Habsburg period. She has been involved in the Jonge Academie from the beginning.

"Science communication as a concept remains vague, and too often it goes only in one direction: Scientists presenting their findings to an audience," she says. "We were looking for a more interactive approach. It turned out that in other countries there are already a lot of scientific research projects with citizen participation. Flanders is lagging behind in terms of citizen science, and we want to help bridge this gap."

The portal is a collaboration between Jonge Academie and the

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Flemish science magazine *Eos*. Scientists can propose research projects on the site to the audience, who are asked to participate.

## Democracy and interaction

“Usually there are about 80 projects running where you can get involved immediately,” Soen explains. “The site fills a need for researchers who want to set up participative projects, where previously each one had to reach an audience on their own. Now all the initiatives are bundled. There is a lot of enthusiasm among both the public and scientists for participative research projects.”

On the site you can find projects on measuring your dog’s intelligence, tracking the growth of local trees or deciphering a 17th-century census. “What they all have in common is that they rely on the help of citizens, not just to fill in a questionnaire but to actively join in the research,” says Soen. “Citizens conduct research and deliver data. In some projects, the participants even have a say in what exactly will be investigated.”

*There is a lot of enthusiasm among both the public and scientists for participative research*

- VIOLET SOEN

The active participation of citizens is more than a communication strategy. It’s a new form of research that has a lot of potential, explains Soen. “The benefits are on different levels. It’s a democratic and interactive form of science with a profound interaction between scientists and citizens.”

On the other hand, there is a clear benefit to science, as such

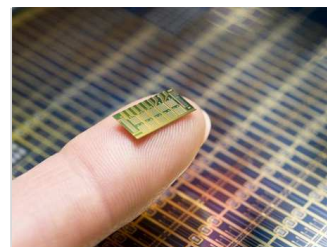
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projects give researchers the opportunity to collect a lot more data than they could on their own. Soen: “I’m a historian. On my own, I can go through a limited number of documents a year in the archives. By mobilising volunteers to browse through the archives, I could get a lot more information. So citizen involvement really helps advance science.”

Citizen science has a lot of potential benefits, but it is taking off slowly in Flanders. So the Jonge Academie has launched a call to promote the concept within research institutes and the government.

## Kick-start

“In neighbouring countries, many more projects are being mapped out, but it is still in an experimental phase here,” says Soen. We need to kick-start citizen science, because there are many positive elements to it, but we also need to tackle ethical issues such as privacy and property rights.”

The enthusiasm for the public to participate in such projects is there, she believes, proven by the success of Jonge Academie’s portal site, which had to be adjusted after a year because of the large number of participants. Universities and research institutions are increasingly thinking about science communication, and communicating research results is emerging as a third pillar alongside education and research.

The Jonge Academie’s position paper also calls on the government to work towards a policy on citizen science. “We have already taken many steps with the Jonge Academie, and it’s now time the government provided a framework to answer the ethical questions. That would be a huge step forward for the development of citizen science.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Toon Lambrechts

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